

## Introduction

Emily Dickinson (1830~ c. 1886) is one of the greatest American poets. However, she was secluded from the public for most of her life. Fewer than ten works were published and they were without her permission. In the man-dominated and traditional poetry world in her time, she and her poetry style were not easily accepted.

“I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” is one of the most famous poems of Dickinson. It is very weird to be “nobody” as a poet because traditional poets in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had to assert themselves. It seems that she rejected to be oneself as same as other traditional poets. My research analyzes this uncertain identity, “nobody,” with the effect of a bog in the poem and why this identity admires a bog.

## Uncertain Image of a Swamp

Dismal Swamp, between Virginia and North Carolina, brought great fear to people in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1728, Colonel William Byrd II (1674~ c. 1744), an elected research member for the border of VA and NC, recorded the swamp and emphasized the necessity of developing anonymous huge swamp. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Edward Ruffin (1794~ c.1865), a wealthy planter and slaveholder, sent his research group to Dismal Swamp, and the group got lost in the wild swamp and thick forest for a few days. Ruffin found it horror in the swamp where Great bears, wild cats, wolves, and hidden slaves might have attacked them (Stilgoe 26). He also emphasized that the swamp should have been drained and exploited for agriculture in order to remove the fear of the wild swamp. In 1806, Thomas Moor (1779~ c. 1852), an Irish poet, was sent to Norfolk in VA as a Naval recorder and wrote a poem about Dismal Swamp, called “A Ballad: the Lake of the Dismal Swamp.” The young narrator laments his lover who died in the swamp. The swamp was represented as death and fear.

This anxiety toward the uncertain swamp was seen with fear and death in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. It can be said that the instability and even flexibility of being “nobody” are emphasized under this image of an uncertain swamp.

## Lacan’s Theory of Identity and Swamp

### Lacan’s Theory of Identity (Fukuhara)

**The Mirror Stage:** This concept is based on infants recognize themselves, looking at a mirror and other children. They gain their visual identity and enter the image-based world.

**The Imaginary Order:** The image-based world after the mirror stage. The identity here is insubstantial. Too much dependence on the image-based identity will lead people to destroy themselves.

Ex. “Je est un autre” (I is an other) by Arthur Rimbaud (1854~ c. 1891), and Narcissus in Greek mythology.

**The Symbolic Order:** The next order after the imaginary. Images are divided, symbolized, and structured here. It gives them meanings. Society and culture ruled by languages and laws are examples. The identity here replaces the identity in the imaginary.

### Lacan’s Concept and Swamp

David Hunter Strother (1816~c. 1888), a travel writer, published his essay about his trip to Dismal Swamp in Harpers Monthly. He wrote the surface of the water looked like a mirror. When he went into the swamp, he remembered his childhood. David Miller considered this experience as the Narcissistic self-reflection (26). It is Lacan’s mirror stage. It is returning from the symbolic order to the imaginary world, which destroys the identity established in the symbolic.

Dickinson’s “nobody,” in a bog, may represent the destroyed self. However, “nobody” prefers to stay in a bog or in Lacan’s imaginary order where identity will be lost. Maybe because “nobody” there will not be symbolized, structured, ruled, and determined. “Nobody” sympathizes with an uncertain bog in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

## Thesis Statement / Method

The poem spoken in a bog effectively enhances the instability of “nobody.”

Literary Analysis

- Focus on the recognition of a swamp in Dickinson’s time.

Ex. Dismal Swamp.

- Adapt psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan (1901~ c. 1981).

## “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?”

I’m Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you - Nobody - too?  
Then there’s a pair of us!  
Don’t tell! They’d advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog! (Fr. 260)

## The First Stanza from “A Ballad: the Lake of the Dismal Swamp.”

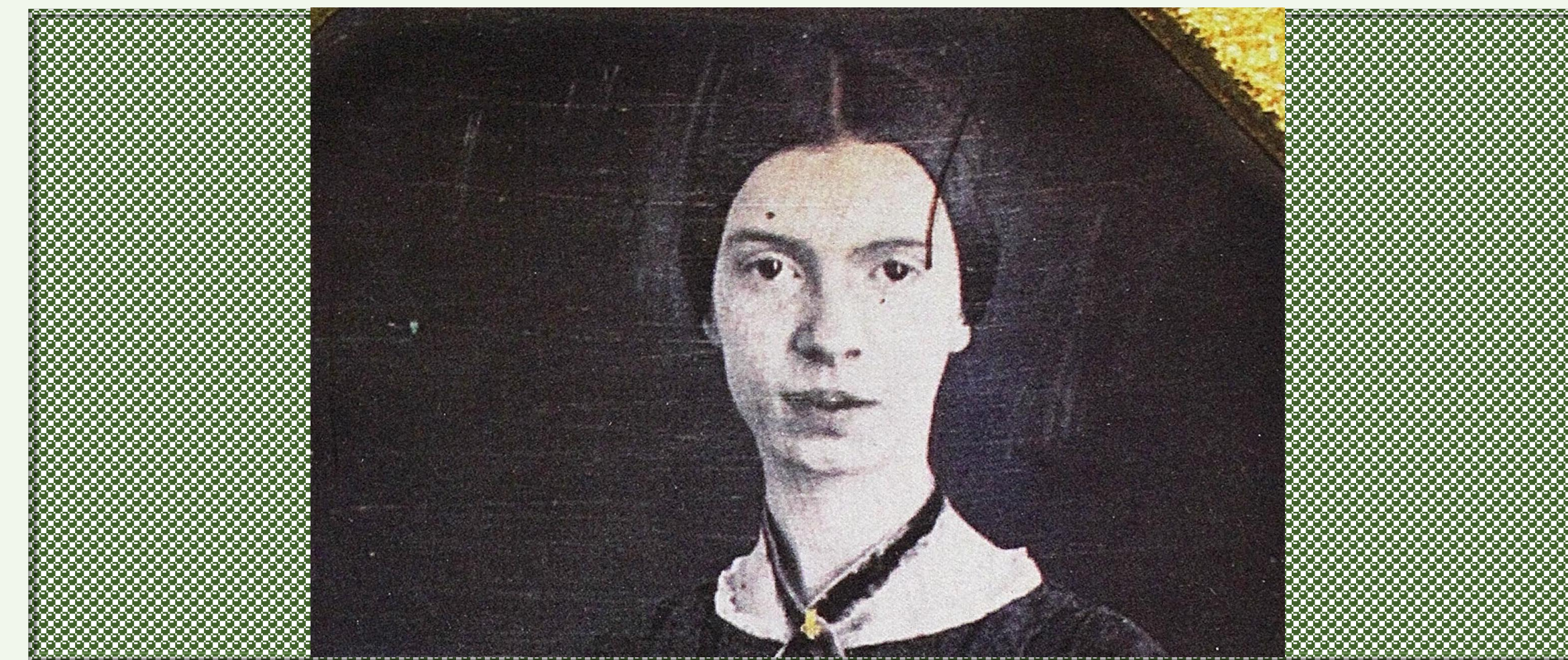
They made her a grave too cold and damp  
For a soul so warm and true;  
And she’s gone to the Lake of the Dismal Swamp,  
Where, all night long, by a fire-fly lamp,  
She paddles her white canoe. (109)

## Literature Review

“Nobody” as...

**Gilbert and Guber:** The double bind between the impossibility of “self-assertion” and the necessity of it as a woman poet”  
→ ”Self-effacement”(584)

**Alelio:** “An alienated concept of subjectivity” that leaves multi-possibility to determine the self. (241)



## Conclusion

The instability of “nobody” is effectively emphasized by a bog. The recognition of a swamp in Dickinson’s time is fear and death because of its uncertainty. A swamp belongs to the imaginary world where the identity in the symbolic order is destroyed. However, this undetermined subjectivity provides the possibility to become anything. This identity is not ruled and structured but free. Dickinson may pursue being “nobody” released from the traditional literary world and the public.

## Works Cited

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